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SHANTINIKETAN AND ITS FOUNDER

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"MY MOTHERLAND" PAMPHLETS.

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I must add in respect of this pamphlet that Miss Helen Veale writes from her personal experiences at Shantiniketan.

M. S. KAMATH,
Editor & Publisher.

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SHANTINIKETAN AND ITS FOUNDER

Of all educational experiments made of recent years in India, none appeals to the imagination quite as warmly as Shantiniketan, the Poet's school, college and latterly university in its truest sense, near Bolpur in Bengal. The tale of its founding and of its founder has been oft told, yet perhaps can bear again retelling; for interest in it is not so widespread in India as one would wish, and Rabindranath Tagore has hitherto been more highly honoured in other countries than in his own, outside Bengal.

To understand fully its conception, it is well to go far back into the Poet's childhood, revealed in the autobiography in his own beautiful words. There we see the small Rabindranath, a shrinking, nervous child, in the rambling family house of the Tagores in Calcutta, motherless and somewhat neglected, at best left to the care of servants and tutors, longing for the rain to prevent his tutor from coming, or justify a plea to stay at home from school. If there has remained an element of morbidness in the Poet's outlook, it is a legacy from those old wrongs of childhood, though out of his pain he has richly brought forth joy for more fortunate children of to-day.

Too many Indian parents give very little attention to the needs of childhood. The household arrangements are made to suit their elders, they have no play-room of which they can be entirely kings, few if any playthings or tools which their little fingers can take joy in handling, and worst of all, every available hour that can be squeezed from the normal day's occupations, is filled with private tuition, or reading

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some dull book with some much duller drudge of an ill-paid teacher, whose salary at some school is too small to keep body and soul together, just because parents prefer to pay for private tuition rather than adequate fees to the school! How vicious is this circle, and how is the educational system of India to free itself from it?

The Birth of Shantiniketan

Remembering this educational bogey of his childhood, the Poet resolved to start a school which should be the antithesis of such as had cast a shadow on his own youth and in December, 1900, he settled at Shantiniketan, with only ten students.

The place was already one of hallowed memories; a favourite Ashram or Retreat of the late Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, the poet's father, who found it most congenial for meditation. An elder brother, Dwijendranath, sage and philosopher, lived close by the school till his death in 1926. Lecturing in America on "my school", Sir Rabindranath Tagore said:—"My father, in one of his numerous travels, had selected the lovely spot as the one suitable for his life of communion with God. This place, with a permanent endowment, he dedicated to the use of those who seek peace and seclusion for their meditation and prayer. I had about ten boys with me when I came here and started my new life with no previous experience whatever."

There, amid stately sal trees, surrounded by a bare stretch of dry, upland country, wind-swept and almost treeless, the school took root and grew, slowly surmounting terrific obstacles that would have daunted a lesser man. From the first there were financial difficulties. The Tagore wealth had been lessened by various vicissitudes in previous generations, and the Poet's branch of the family contained no one keen on worldly success to build a fresh fortune;

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artists, poets, philosophers they were, creative thinkers, but no money-grubbers, brilliantly talented though they were. Though generally holding aloof from extremists in politics Rabindranath's nationalist sympathies were too strong for his educational venture to win much support from government, and of the rich and generous patrons in India who may be relied on to support good institutions, most were too orthodox in their Hinduism to approve the work of a son of the Brahmo Samaj. So he has had chiefly to rely on what he could earn by writing and lecturing, and on the support he could win for his life work from the intellectual circles of Europe and America. There have been many critics in India, even in his own Bengal, who have found fault with Rabindranath Tagore's literary work on the score that it took too much of its inspiration from western sources, and this is doubtless true, owing largely to the prevalent intellectual atmosphere of the Brahmo Samaj to which the family belonged, though the Poet has long transcended its limitations. But whatever he has garnered in Western countries has been assimilated in an Indian mind and heart, to enrich but not change its native soil, making it fruitful of new garlands wherewith to crown the motherland. Is not every Renaissance the result of the impact of alien elements on a culture that has grown stagnant? Educationally and poetically none need grudge the part that the West has played in the fashioning of Rabindranath Tagore's works, for he has made all gloriously Indian.

A New Brindaban

Let us in imagination visit Shantiniketan, as it was even in early days, before it had reached its present expansion. It was a kind of Brindaban, the Poet being its Sri Krishna. In the morning, instead of a dormitary bell to scare away sleep, hands of joyous singers would patrol the grounds to awaken the drowsy. All would draw water from the wells for their own bath; fifteen minutes of silence would be held

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for meditation, which was not compulsory, but must be respected by all so far as refraining from speech or noise, and then open air classes would gather, chiefly under trees the boys being allowed freely to choose their day's activities, of mind and body, so long as these were useful to themselves or others. Time-tables did not exist, and any day's program could be summarily interrupted when Nature's smile proved irresistible and they were moved to go out on a day's excursion. All had free access, at any time, to the Poet's room, and great was the joy when he was known to have been inspired with a new song, and they were called to learn it at his lips. Almost every evening his nephew "Dinu," whom he called "The treasury of my songs," would play and sing, and at dawn or in the moonlight hours the Poet himself would often be seen roaming through the groves and singing. From the first there were girls among the students, daughters of the teachers, and soon it became quite co-educational, with a special lady superintendent and hostels for girls. These would go every morning to gather the fragrant sephali flowers for garlands. All life found sanctuary there, and had done so since the days of the Maharshi. Boys and girls managed their own dairy farm, their own post office, hospital, place of worship and various workshops for arts and crafts, as printing and weaving. They had their own self-governing councils and courts, maintaining discipline in their own way quite satisfactorily, though corporal punishment was not allowed. Naturally, considering its founder, the school has excelled most along the lines of creative art, music, painting and dancing. Distinguished men gathered round the Poet to help him in his labour of love, as the artists Nandalal Bose, Asit Haldar and Abanindranath Tagore, Satish Chandra Roy (till his early death), sympathetic Westerners like C. F. Andrews and W. Pearson, and many others who would be attracted, for longer or shorter periods, to reside within the Ashrama.

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The Great Festival

Best of all, perhaps, from the educational point of view, were the plays, written by Rabindranath Tagore and acted by himself and all his young companions, especially in the autumn term. The artistic perfection of The Autumn Festival —one of these—acted in its own natural environment by its creator and the children of his spirit, is indescribable and not to be forgotten by those who have been privileged to see it. In these dramatic productions all the energies of teachers and pupils would find scope for expression—all would truly labour together to bring forth the work of art, and for these alone Shantiniketan deserves to hold a unique place in India for ever, as a sort of Indian Bayreuth to which the monopoly of performance of Tagore's plays should be restricted, just as Wagner's Operas were the monopoly of Bayreuth. Even in Calcutta, though there too acted under the personal supervision of the Poet and his family, the plays lacked something of the perfection of their natural setting.

One criticism has been made of the school at Bolpur which perhaps merits consideration, and that is that it was fitted for young Rabindranaths, for boys of an artistic nature, rather than for healthy young specimens of average boyhood. There we have to remember that the average Bengali is three fourths a poet by nature. Games have been freely encouraged to counteract any morbid tendencies of incipient genius, and if visitors have been sometimes struck with the delicacy of appearance of many of the boys, they should be reminded that these come from malaria-stricken districts only too often, where the physical body has had little chance to grow strong. What Shantiniketan can do to remedy their physical defects, it tries to do, but on no system of compulsion, for that would seem to be paying too high a price even for greater robustness. Freedom is "the pearl of great price", taking precedence of all other aims.

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The Nobel Prize

In 1912 Rabindranath had to go to England for medical treatment, and there he was discovered by a circle of literary men, including Stopford Brooke and the Irish poet Yeats, who were at once entirely captivated by the beauty of some translations of songs from the Gitanjali. This fame spread rapidly, in Europe and America, and he returned to India a world famed man, to his own embarassment! In November of 1913, one evening a great commotion arose at Shantiniketan over the arrival of telegrams congratucating him on having won the nobel prize. Boys and teachers alike were wild with joy over the triumph of their beloved Gurudeva, and marched round the Ashrama in procession, singing their school song, and ending the celebration with a bonfire. In vain the Poet tried to restrain them in their homage. He was to get used to publicity later, but now it dismayed him and he fled from it. "My heart sank when I saw those people at Bombay and realised that they were going to make a public show of me."

One amusing consequence of his new fame was the number of letters it brought him from would-be poets, who wanted his assistance in gaining accesss to the Nobel judges for their own poetical efforts. One single mail at Shantiniketan brought three appeals; the first enclosing a very bad English Sonnet for his judgment, the second wanting a letter of introduction to the Head Examiner, while the third asked a loan of five thousand rupees out of the prize money. Such are the penalties of fame!

New Spirit of Freedom

Conventional visitors would often be shocked to see the freedom of behaviour at Shantiniketan. In the collection of lectures called Personality, the Poet describes one such incident. "I well remember the surprise and annoyance of an

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experienced head-master, reputed to be a successful disciplinarian, when he saw one of the boys of my school climbing a tree, and choosing a fork of the branches for settling down to his studies. I had to say to him in explanation that childhood is the only period of life when a civilized man can exercise his choice between the branches of a tree and his drawing room chair, and should I deprive this boy of that privilege because I, as a grown up man, am barred from it? What is surprising is to notice the same head-master's approbation of the boys' studying botany. He believes in an impersonal knowledge of the tree because that is science, but not in a personal experience of it."

Another quotation from the same book will perhaps best show the model to which Shantiniketan has been shaping itself. "In India we still cherish in our memory the tradition of the forest colonies of great teachers. These places were neither schools nor monasteries, in the modern sense of the word. They consisted of homes, where with their families lived men whose object was to see the world in God and to realise their own life in him. Though they lived outside society, yet they were to society what the sun is to the planets, the centre from which it received its life and light, and here boys grew up in an intimate vision of eternal life before they were thought fit to enter the state of the house-holder. Thus in ancient India the school was there where was the life itself. There the students were brought up, not in the academic atmosphere of scholarship and learning, or in the maimed life of monastic declusion, but in the atmosphere of living aspiration. They took the cattle to pasture, collected fire wood, gathered fruit, cultivated kindness to all creatures, and grew in their spirit with their own teachers' spiritual growth. This was possible because the primary object of these places was not teaching, but giving shelter to those who lived their life in God."

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A True Ashrama

Of such ashramas Shantiniketan is truly a modern revival, showing signs, as it should, of the lapse of centuries and a consequent wider world to be contacted, a more refined capacity of emotion and taste, but the same in essential spirit. "The teacher prosecutes his own study, living a life of simplicity, and helping the students in their lessons as a part of his life and not of his profession." How much superior is such education to that given in the ordinary school, where the willing student is crammed daily with more-or-less unrelated facts, dead to him, however interesting in themselves, if he cannot assimilate them to any vital necessities of his being; and the unwilling student sinks into dull apathy, or is goaded by punishment into hypocrisy! Only the "unwilling" student? No, even the willing and bright boy or girl is goaded, by the pin-pricks of an unworthy but carefully fostered ambition, into a form of hypocrisy as blatant as their duller comrades, for they learn to imitiate their teachers, to pretend admiration for what they have been told is admirable, to rattle off from memory strings of fine epithets descriptive of works of art which they have never seen and probably would not like, while their attention has never been called to the beauties of sky, sea and river, and grace and beauty scarcely enter their lives, certainly not their class-rooms! All that are best among modern educational ideals call for more of reality, of true contact with life at its highest and noblest, and less of organization and routine in our schools, and we are coming to realise that quality, rather than quantity, of knowledge is of importance. H. G. Wells has contended, with very little exaggeration, that subjects matter scarcely at all, and that an excellent education could be imparted through one subject alone, if its teacher be an enthusiast. Of course the difficulty is to find enthusiasts, in sufficient number, to undertake the education of future citizens, but India is supremely happy in

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having her Rabindranath Tagore, most original and successful of pioneers along this line.

The Poet has said himself that his aims at Shantiniketan have never been static ; that they have changed and developed with himself, for indeed the school is a very vital organism expressing his life and thought, and giving liberation to the very soul of India, to whose anguished call he was sensitive.

Political Troubles

As the dark years of the war passed and India entered on days of fierce political unrest, when disappointments, outrages, repressions, satyagraha, non-cooperation and communal discords followed close on each other, the Poet suffered terribly, for none was more sensitive than he to his country's wrongs, none keener that her fair honour be vindicated. He had renounced the Knighthood conferred on him by the King of England, whose Government in India he had ceased to respect, and thenceforth used only the title of Doctor, the University Degree given him by his own countrymen. But he could not entirely identify himself with any definite party of nationalists, and came early to dislike nationalism, as a disease that had corrupted India. From his loneliness of spiritual outlook he looked out over a world suffering from an orgy of nationalism, whereby came exploitations, rivalries, wars and all attendant miseries. India alone, he thought, had in the past been international, and she alone could restore to a distracted world that sense of the Unity of life, that wholeness of spiritual purpose, which could save this machine-made civilisation from self-destruction.

An amusing tale is told of his encounter with an ardent follower of Mr. Gandhi, to whom he put the question. "Do you seriously believe that six months turning of the Charka will bring Swaraj?" When answered "I do not believe in anything more than I do in that," Rabindranath very deftly

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turned the argument, by remarking that if he were told that three days worshipping the feet of a panda would win him a place in heaven, he would refuse a Heaven so cheaply to be obtained. In the same way he regarded such Swaraj as could be won by six months turning of the Charka as not worth the winning!

Visva-Bharati

In 1920 and 1921 he made an extensive tour through Europe and America, receiving everywhere such enthusiastic welcome as almost overwhelmed him. Especially in Germany, France, Denmark and Sweden was he feted and applauded, governments offering him hospitality and putting aæroplanes at his disposal for his conveyance. Generous gifts too were made to his school, and eminent scholars offered their services as teachers. The result was the development of a plan to expand the school at Shantiniketan into a World University. and this was formally opened on December, 23rd, 1921, under the name of Viswa Bharati. This University was to be independent of Government support and was to be open to all persons of either sex, irrespective of nationality, race, creed, caste or class, at a uniform small charge. The main object of the University was to bring together seekers after truth, from as many varied cultural centres as possible, that diverse points of view could be harmonised or proved mutually complementary, and that better understanding and co-operation should unite East and West.

Mr. Sylvain Levi, the great French savant, was among the first to offer his services, and a young Englishman, Mr. L. K, Elmhirst took the highly important work of converting the agricultural experiment at Surul into an Institute of Rural Reconstruction. Musicians, artists and sculptors from the great cultural centres of Europe and America came eagerly, to give and to receive,

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Examinations And Degrees

At first the aim seems to have been to hold aloof from modern university schemes, pursuing knowledge purely for its own sake and issuing no diplomas; but some compromise here has proved necessary, and now the Visva Bharati issues diplomas to all who go satisfactorily through its courses of study and also conducts courses qualifying for degrees of Calcutta University. It is a pity that this should have been necessary, but perhaps it was too much to hope that in these days of economic strain a sufficient number of young men and women would have courage to wholly neglect lower for higher aims. With exquisite sarcasm, in the seventh Bulletin of Visva-Bharati, Dr. Rabindranath analyses the examination mania: "Mind, when long deprived of its natural food of truth and freedom of growth, develops an unnatural craving for success; and our students have fallen victims to the mania for success in examinations. Success consists in obtaining the largest number of marks with the strictest economy of knowledge. It is a deliberate cultivation of disloyalty to truth, of intellectual dishonesty, of a foolish imposition by which the mind is encouraged to rob itself. But as we are by means of it made to forget the existence of mind, we are supremely happy at the result. We pass examinations, and shrivel up into clerks, lawyers and police inspectors, and we die young!"

Such are the words in which the Poet satirizes the official universities and their aims. What he was founding was to be very different. "In our centre of Indian learning we are providing for the co-ordinate study of all these different cultures—the Vedic, the Puranic, the Buddhist, the Jain, the Islamic, the Sikh and the Zorrostrian. The Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan have also been added, for in the past India did not remain isolated within her own boundaries. In order to learn what she was in her relation to the whole

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continent of Asia, these cultures must be studied. Side by side with them we are co-operating with all that is best in Western culture. For only then are we able to assimilate this last contribution to our common stock. A river flowing within banks is truly our own, and it can contain its due tributaries; but our relations with a flood can only prove disastrous."

A Recent Loss

One irreparable loss has recently fallen on Shantiniketan, through the marriage and departure for England of Mr. L. K. Elmhirst, who had so admirably entered into the poet's ideal in his department of Rural Reconstruction at Surul. But from Cornwall, where he has organised work on similar lines, Mr. Elmhirst sends still a large yearly contribution to the funds of Visva Bharati.

It is also to be regretted that the Poet has found himself obliged to compromise on some of the high ideals with which he started. For instance, at one time it was a strict rule that no flesh food should be eaten, as all life was sacred. But by medical advice this is now changed, and both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food are provided.

The World's Nest

Visva-Bharati to-day comprises many departments. First comes the Patha-Bhavana, the School, run still on the same lines as first described; then there is the Siksha-Bhavana or Shantiniketan College, preparing its students of both sexes either for diplomas of Visva-Bharati or for the degrees of Calcutta University; third is the Vidya-Bhavana, offering to Indians and foreigners alike facilities for research into the antiquities of Indian languages and literatures, and the general study of Philology; the Kala-Bhavana is a school of Fine Arts and Crafts, and the Sangit-Bhavana, a School of Music and Dancing. All these are grouped together at Shantiniketan, while closeby, at Surul, there is the

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Institute of Rural Reconstruction, and the publishing department has its home in Calcutta.

There will come a time when India will be able to estimate more justly than she yet has done the work of this noble son of hers, and beside this, his gift to her needs, those of the best statesmen, politicians and reformers, will dwindle to insignificance.

A last word may fitly tell of the name Visva-Bharati, and why it was chosen. It is taken from the Sanskrit Vedic text:—

यत्र विश्वं भवति एकनीडम्

"Where the whole world forms its one single nest," and this was adopted as its motto. What more beautiful one could express the spirit of a University, where the unity of all life is to be contacted and its secrets explored, but not in the cold atmosphere of a laboratory, rather in that of a nest where the fledgelings are protected under the mother's wings while rocked on the boughs of the living tree of Human knowledge, and played on by the wind, rain and sunshine of contemporary experience. Only a Poet could have chosen such a motto, and only a poet could have provided India with such a home for youth and such a model of national education.

It seems that Rabindranath Tagore expected to be called from the scene of his earthly labours in 1929 or 1930, at the age of 68. This had been indicated by his horoscope. But he has already passed this period, and has celebrated his seventieth birthday this year. May he live long enough to see this work to which he has devoted the greater part of his life placed beyond danger of wrecking. May the rich and generous realise in time its financial needs, and not wait for the death of its founder to rally to its support. The whole world will suffer from the loss of the Poet of Bengal, but he will yet live as long as Shantineketam remains to express his mind and heart.

HELEN VEALE.

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